

**EPILOGUE: HER FIRST
RODEO**

LOLA WEST

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S *even Months Later...*

The day before Sarah and Horse's wedding, I was in the barn at the ranch because Sarah insisted that she needed to take her entire wedding party on the trail ride. She wanted to do it the day before the wedding and the whole situation was a huge ordeal. First of all, Horse had a full-on brood of besties. Seven highfalutin music industry people, none of whom were riders per se. So, I had to reach out to my connections from the Special Spurs Rodeo and find seven horses for these people to ride. Secondly, Sarah wasn't asking for just any trail ride. She wanted us all to go up Robert's Valley Ridge to the waterfall. It was a woodsy, hilly trek up the edge of a muddy streambed. While the destination was so beautiful that it felt downright sacred, it wasn't exactly my first choice when leading a bunch of novice East Coast riders, but honestly there was no reasoning with her about it. Admittedly, I wasn't in her good graces lately because I'd decided that her wedding was the perfect time to secretly dye my brothers' hair pink.

I'd been plotting my revenge for their meddling with Caroline and me for months. Biding my time, looking for an ideal moment to execute the perfect prank. When Sarah picked pink as the accent color for her wedding, the path was clear. Managing to time it so I switched out all three shampoo bottles on the same day without one of them warning the others was a feat. I didn't think I would actually pull it off, but I did. Bill's hair was dark enough that the effect on him was more subtle, but when they came striding in for breakfast with a trio of pink locks, Sarah immediately turned to me.

Scowling, she said, "Why do they look like that?"

I shrugged. "I owed 'em one."

"On my wedding day?" she screeched.

"They're the right color," I argued, instantly feeling guilty. "People will think they did it in solidarity, to honor your love."

She pinched the bridge of her nose and took a deep breath before tightly saying, "It's my wedding, Wyatt. My wedding. Did you even consider my feelings? Maybe I didn't want a lifetime of wedding photos filled with pink-haired brothers."

She was right. I was so caught up in my own laughs that I didn't consider her feelings. It wasn't like me to be so inconsiderate, and I felt terrible.

Repentant, I said, "Shit, I'm so sorry, Sarah. I just thought it would be a laugh. A story to tell your kids."

Luke offered, "Maybe Maddie can fix it."

“No, it is what it is.” Sarah sighed. Then smirking, she turned to me and maniacally said, “But you better dye yours pink now, too.”

My brothers were absolutely delighted with this turn of events.

Wanting back into Sarah’s good graces, I trekked down to Maddie and Delores’ salon and they did their worst. The following morning, standing in the barn tacking the horses, preparing for Horse’s friends, my siblings and all our partners to arrive, I looked like a fifteen-year-old kid going through his punk rebellion. Unlike Bill, my pink wasn’t subtle. Maddie did not take kindly to my pinking of Luke’s golden locks, so before she dyed mine, she bleached my tips. I looked like a pencil eraser. But I felt happy because when I came back by the house yesterday afternoon, Sarah saw me and after she laughed, she pointed at me and said, “Not forgiven, but loved.”

That was good enough for me.

Still, I dragged my ass out of bed this morning, kissed Caroline’s sleepy forehead, and made the five-minute drive back to our ranch to meet up with my brothers, because even if this trail ride was a little crazy, I wanted Sarah to see that I cared about her wedding and would do anything to make it perfect for her. My plan was to make the execution of the trail ride flawless and to provide a little breakfast festivities before we mounted up and headed out. I roped my dad and the others in on my scheme. My brothers and I were preparing the horses, while my father, Kat, Miriam, and Hazel were in Kat’s house making a breakfast party for the whole brood. When Sarah came outside, she would find a

picnic for her and her wedding party and all the horses outfitted and ready to go.

Watching each of my pink-haired brothers tack the horses, it occurred to me that we were really grown. I mean, obviously we'd been adults for a while but a certain part of me was totally defined by being a part of my sibling group. After tomorrow's wedding, all of them but me would have officially started their own families. Bill and Kat got married in the barn loft. Luke and Maddie had a small ceremony in the backyard. Cody and Jamison tied the knot at the courthouse a couple of days after Flynn legally became Cody's son. So, that just left me and Caroline. It was a forgone conclusion. We were getting married. We'd decided to wait until after Sarah's wedding to get engaged. We didn't want to rain on her parade. But I regularly teased Caroline that I was gonna kidnap her and drag her off to Vegas. She actually seemed to like the idea of eloping. She said planning a wedding made her nervous. So, maybe we would just haul off and get married one day, although, I think the Sheriff would be devastated if she got married without him.

Sheriff Winchester, who I called Hank now, loved Caroline more than life. I could see it. He'd accepted that she was grown and knew what she wanted. I think sometimes he still had doubts that she'd be happy with a small-town life, but he'd kept them to himself and he embraced our relationship. He sort of had to. Caroline was stubborn about him and for quite a while she held a grudge for his attempt to control her life, particularly our relationship, so talking to me was the only way he had access to her. He and I had actually kind of become friends. About two months ago, a couple weeks after I moved into her house, I convinced her that we should have him over for dinner. It wasn't perfect,

but they talked and now he comes to dinner once a week. My girl loves her father. With time, it would all blow over. He was coming to Sarah's wedding, but he wouldn't be with us today.

Tying Napoleon to the hitching post, Bill looked at me and asked, "Does anyone know why Sarah is insisting on this ride today?"

I shook my head no. "I asked her more than once, but she's keeping her reason pretty close to her chest."

Luke who was near enough to hear us said, "I asked too, but I didn't get any more information." Leaving Luke in the dark was telling, because while I was the one most likely to unearth a secret, Luke was the one we confided in.

"I told her it was a bridezilla choice and it pissed her off." Cody smirked, fastening a bridle buckle.

Of course he did.

"So none of us know why Sarah wants to drag a bunch of novice riders up that trail?" Bill asked, confirming.

"Nope." I shrugged. "But she must have a reason cause she's not stupid."

Bill sighed and shook his head. "Yep, I guess she must." What he was really saying was, *she better*.

Looking at Bill, all tied up in knots and controlling himself from protecting us as if we were still the children he felt responsible for at sixteen, I remembered what Sarah said standing in the Bozeman arena when Horse had broken her heart: She was a grown-ass woman who needed our support not our protection. With that in mind, I decided to

trust that my willful little sister had a plan worth supporting.

SARAH WAS UTTERLY and thoroughly surprised by the morning soiree I created. Under Hazel's watchful eye, the crew in the kitchen created a bountiful display of muffins and pastries. There was also coffee and juice and some handheld breakfast pies, some filled with eggs and meat and others with veggies—because with Horse's East Coast friends, I was betting Luke wasn't the only picky eater in the bunch.

Horse's people were a rowdy bunch, laughing and talking like a family that truly cared for each other. Despite their edgy haircuts, sleek style, and plethora of tattoos, they seemed like down-to-earth people. And that was saying a lot considering there was a roomful of Grammys among them. Each and every one of them seemed to think that Sarah was a goddess. I knew Horse had a dark past, that he lost a brother and lost himself. But I got the feeling that these people lost a brother too, and that after that loss, they thought they'd never really get Horse back—until Sarah. Their care for my sister showed, so they were alright in my book. Honestly, Kat, Sarah, and Bill were completely at home among all of them, having worked or celebrated with most in the past. I knew two of them myself: Marcus Daily, Kat and Sarah's manager; and Josh Devreau, their producer. The others had introduced themselves, but I was pretty sure we could benefit from those sticker name tags.

Having already had our fill of muffins and handheld pies, Caroline and I stood off to the side, watching everyone else enjoy the picnic I'd organized.

Tucked into my armpit, Caroline said, "You did a good thing, my glitter bear with pretty pink hair." Over the last six months, I realized that she was never going to drop that cutesy, wootsy stuff, but I'd started to get a real kick out of it because anytime she called me by a fuzzy or sparkling nickname, what I heard was, *Hey, Wyatt, I'm horny and want your cock*, so as soon as the words 'glitter bear' left her lips, I was hard.

I gripped her waist, pinned her to my hip, and basically dragged her toward the barn. The left side of her body was pressed into my right side and with her right hand she was smacking my chest, whisper-yelling, "Wyatt, what the hell are you doing?"

"You know the punishment for that cutesy, smutsy chatter of yours," I growled.

She giggled nervously. Looking back over her shoulder at the crowd of people socializing on the lawn, she said, "Not now. We can't."

I tightened my grip and smiled. "Oh, we can and we will."

Her cheeks rouged right up. "People will wonder where we've gone off to."

"Maybe, but most likely they'll just know," I said smartly.

Ultimately, she was always my partner in crime. She shifted so she wasn't pressed against me anymore, then grabbed my hand and said, "Well then, you better pick up the pace my pretty whittle, peeny weeny because if we get started, you

better believe we're gonna finish." I gripped her hand tighter and went to feign disapproval of her ludicrous pet names, but seeing the fire in her eyes reminded me there was nothing to discuss.

Honestly, we barely made it past the barn door before I had her pressed against the wall. Caroline and I loved to fuck. We made love, too. A lot. But this kind of thing, a quickie when no one was looking, this was a big piece of our sexual wheelhouse. I just couldn't keep my hands off her. That said, we were dressed for a trail ride in jeans and boots. So, the good old put-your-legs-around-my-waist-and-let-me-pound-you-into-this-wall move was a complete impossibility.

No matter. I unbuttoned her jeans, slipped my hand into her panties, and cupped her pussy. "Remember the first time I watched you come, Caro?" I baited. "Remember how you touched yourself for me?"

Panting, Caroline cooed, "As I remember it, you touched yourself for me."

The corner of my mouth lifted at her tart chatter. I slipped one finger past her pussy lips, dipping into her wet core, and she shook beneath my touch before I said, "Potatoes, Potahtoes."

She reached for my bulge. "I want to feel your cock in my hand."

Literally a slave to her desire, my dick immediately bucked toward her. As I stroked her, she unbuttoned my jeans, circling her fingers around my shaft. At her touch, I grunted my approval. "Such a cock lover," I teased.

"Only yours." She moaned.

I slipped my fingers inside her and she started moving her hips, drawing me in deeper. “Fuck,” I breathed out, my exhalation hot against her ear. “That’s right, baby, fuck my hand. Fuck it hard like it’s my cock disappearing inside you.” She whimpered and I felt her clenching on my fingers.

One of the horses shifted and neighed in the barn. No one was near us yet, but the sound reminded us both that we were basically out in the open. Caroline tensed as I slowly stroked my thumb across her clit and said, “Did you hear that, baby? The rustle of the horses?”

She bit her lip and nodded her head, still pumping my cock in her hand.

“Do you think they’ll catch us, Caro? Do you think they’ll get close enough to the barn to hear you come?” To be clear, Caroline would hate if anyone but me saw her like this, wanton and bucking against my fingers. She’d be absolutely mortified. But the idea of getting caught always got her going.

“Do you think they’ll see me lick your cream from my fingers?” I moaned.

That did it. With my girl it was all about the mental game. Her head fell back, her pussy clenched, and Caroline gasped her way through her orgasm in my arms. As soon as she regained her wits, she dropped down and took my cock in her mouth. I wasn’t expecting it, and that made it all the more welcome. Still stroking me, she wrapped her lips around the head and sucked. Her face was flushed from her orgasm, and I knew that at this point we really were in danger of getting caught. I should have stopped her, but I couldn’t. I didn’t know how to turn down Caroline’s mouth.

All I could do was say, "Please listen, babe. They'll make noise as they get close." And then I resigned myself to the pleasure she was offering, looking down and watching my dick slip in and out of her lips, feeling the wet warmth of her swirling tongue. I was close to coming from our earlier ministrations, so as soon as she picked up the pace of her movements, I started to feel the pressure building in my balls. The sloppy sounds of her suction edging me closer.

I drove my fingers into her hair, angling her head up just a bit. "Like that. Just like that." I groaned and then seconds later I exploded in her mouth. As soon as I came, Caroline jumped up, grabbing me by the shoulder closest to the barn door, and spun me around so that my back was to her back and she was facing the entrance. Startled from my bliss by her rushed movements, I heard them. The chatter and laughter of approaching people. Quickly buckling my jeans, I whispered, "Holy fuck, Caro."

She giggled nervously as Bill and Cody came through the barn door. Fully dressed, I turned so that Caroline and I were side by side and put my arm around her.

Snarky as usual, Cody said, "I wondered where you two ran off to."

Cheeky and her special kind of awkward in return, Caroline said, "A better choice of words would have been got off to."

Bill laughed and so did I. Cody blushed. Most of my life I'd never seen anyone make Cody blush, but Caroline seemed to do it all the time.

HORSE'S FRIENDS were bold and savvy. Each and every one of them climbed on their horses and took control. They didn't look like they'd been riding for years because when you're a novice rider you just can't, but they were fearless. There was no balking or whining. There was also no lack of respect for the animals that carried them up the steep path to Robert's Valley Ridge. Unlucky for the earth but lucky for us, it was a dry summer, so the stream was not much more than a trickle. The lack of moisture alleviated the muddy element, which had been my biggest concern for the day. Novice riders really don't enjoy their horses slipping around in the mud, particularly on an incline. But I got the feeling this group might. They seemed like they liked the edge of everything a lot more than I did.

My father, Luke, Cody, Bill, and I split ourselves between them, making sure someone was watching everyone. Our women also dispersed among the crowd, but they were more socializing than strategizing. Honestly, there was a lot of intermingling and chatter among us. And that was good, because we were a big crowd, and after this, we would feel more bonded when we were celebrating together tomorrow.

I rode side by side with the most muscular of Horse's friends, Bruno. Apparently, he owned Kat and Sarah's record label. I was atop my leopard Appaloosa stallion, Dots McGee, and he was riding an American quarter horse who was the color of cherry wood with a fat white marking on her forehead. She was calm and sturdy, and honestly, he would be fine up the trail on her back. I was sure of it.

I didn't get the feeling that Bruno tripped or fell that often. He had a wily smile and a thick head of dark hair. I felt him

assessing me before we spoke, and I got the feeling that if he grew up in Conway, we would have been either best friends or serious rivals.

“What’s the deal with this group outing?” he asked, his voice low enough that the others around us couldn’t really hear him. “Not that this isn’t beautiful, but I get the feeling that I’m being roped into something.”

I shrugged. “You’d have to ask my sister but good luck because I couldn’t get her to tell me shit all.”

He laughed. “I did ask her. She was not forthcoming. But you feel it, too, right? The sneaky underneath the whole come-see-the-beauty-of-the-big-sky-from-the-top-of-a-horse bit.”

When he spoke, his tone was bright, cheery even. I liked him. He was painfully likable, and I am sure that served him well in business and in life. But a part of me could feel his dark underbelly. Looking into Bruno’s eyes I saw the manipulator in myself. He was me with deeper scars and less family. Me with a rougher edge. Bruno could read people like I could. And he made damn sure they didn’t read him, just like I did, so I hesitated for a minute before answering, wondering if being in cahoots with Bruno was a place I wanted to be. Because that’s what he was offering me, a subtle secret backroom deal where he and I became buddies—but the price was acknowledging that my sister was manipulating us both in a way that felt irritating. He was testing me. Seeing if I would throw her under the bus to gain his trust—not a chance. I was pretty sure that if I had, he wouldn’t want to befriend me at all.

“Maybe she thinks you city dwellers could use the fresh air,” I suggested, smiling in a way that made it clear I was with her, now and always.

Bruno grinned. I’d passed his test. “Not a fucking chance. She’s up to somethin’ but I kinda love her for it. Not many people are savvy enough to keep me in the dark.”

“Me neither,” I grumbled. “But you can trust that if we’re being led, it’s not astray.”

He nodded and then abruptly switching topics, he said, “Dude, what the fuck is up with the pink hair?” I had a hat on but obviously he’d seen me earlier or maybe I’d lifted it to wipe my brow. He continued. “Don’t get me wrong, you look fabulous, but you and your brothers don’t exactly seem like the fabulous pink hair kind.”

“Would you believe we did it to match Sarah’s wedding colors?” I asked hopefully.

“Nope,” he retorted sarcastically.

“Yeah, me neither.” I sighed before continuing because even though I knew she’d forgiven me, I still felt a little grim about the fact that I upset Sarah on her wedding weekend. “Okay, basically, my brothers irritated me, so I pranked them by slipping the dye in their shampoo. But then when Sarah saw them, she was upset. Ya know, because of the whole wedding photo thing. Anyway, she wanted consistency.”

“That backfired, huh?”

“Maybe a little,” I joked. “But also, I disagree with your original assessment—I think pink and fabulous suits me perfectly.”

He was full-on chuckling now. “Not at all.” He shook his head, clearly delighted by the whole scenario. “But I’m pretty sure we—meaning my people and your people—were meant for each other, so that’s a plus.”

As we broke through the tree line and rode into the grassy space of the plateau next to the waterfall, I said, “Dude, I still have more dye. If you really want to hang with us, I can make it happen.”

Bruno smiled, but I had lost his attention because like everyone who saw the view from the top of the waterfall at crested valley ridge for the first time, he was in awe. The view was spectacular. It was high enough that it seemed like you could see all of the Montana wilds spreading out below and above the big blue sky filled with puffy white clouds. The waterfall crashed and roared just to the left but somehow next to it there was a huge grassy knoll, like someone just up and dropped a perfect place for a church picnic in the middle of the sky. My mother used to tell us that this spot was enchanted, created by the earth fairies to remind us that nature is sacred and glorious.

Letting Bruno and the others take in their fill, I headed for my brothers who were preparing to tie up eighteen damn horses. We’d taken the ride up earlier in the week just to make sure it was possible. It was, just barely. Like my momma had said, the space was magical. While everyone was dismounting and all the horses were being dealt with, people meandered a bit, but once we’d completed those tasks, Sarah called on us.

She asked us to stand in a circle. It was breezy and the air smelled like grass and earth. It smelled like summer. Sarah seemed nervous. For a second, she just had us all there quiet

while she bounced a little pebble back and forth between her hands and looked at her boot tips, and then taking a deep breath, she said, “I love Horse. I love him so deeply that when he’s not in the room my skin feels a little too tight.” She looked up and made eye contact with Horse’s friends before she said, “But you all know a part of him that I never got to know.”

I felt the tension moving through the group like wildfire and Horse’s eyes closed. Next to Caroline who was next to me, one of Horse’s female friends, the one with the tattoos on her arms, quietly breathed, “Garrett.”

Sarah didn’t hear her. Instead, she had her face turned so it was in profile to me but looking straight up at Horse. She took his hand as she said, “I’m sure most of you know that Horse isn’t fancy. He could live out of one duffle bag for the rest of his life, so this wedding I wanted—a big girly wedding with pink satin ribbons and bridesmaids and groomsmen and everything bridal magazines sell—he couldn’t care less. All he really wanted was to marry me. But I know him, and in his heart, he wishes that he could have one thing.”

Next to Caroline, tears started to race down the tattooed girl’s face, and Caroline took her hand. Sarah caught that moment, and suddenly she looked teary, too. She took another deep breath, and then she said, “The only thing Horse would want tomorrow would be to have his brother with us.”

There were glassy eyes popping up all around me. Sarah stopped speaking. She scanned the circle looking at the broken faces of all of Horse’s friends and she seemed a little shaken but she went on. “If I’ve overstepped we will stop

now, but I brought you to this place because after my mama died, I came here with my family, and this is the spot in the world where I feel closest to heaven.”

A certain jaded kind of snicker skipped through the crowd and Sarah smiled. “Don’t get the wrong idea—I’m not some country bumpkin asking you to join my séance. But I’d like to call on the idea of Garrett.” At his name the silence returned to the group. “I was hoping each of you could introduce me to him in your own way—tell me a story or just a quality or a thought. I’d like to celebrate him today. Ask for his blessing.”

Horse dropped his face into his hands, and it was clear he was crying.

Sarah panicked, shook her head back and forth, and reached for him, saying, “Oh no, forget it. We don’t have to do this.” I caught her glancing at my father, and he gave her a curt nod, starting to turn toward the horses. But then it all shifted.

Horse grabbed Sarah and pulled her hard to his chest and said, “No. Do it. I want to do this. I fucking love you is all.”

I loved her, too. My sister was good, brave people.

CAROLINE

I held tightly to Kelly's hand. I'd talked to her on the ride up and she was tough and funny, crass in the most delightful ways. She wasn't feminine in a traditional way; she was stocky and strong and looked like a tomboy. But I would bet men found her sexy. Her laugh was infectious and she oozed confidence. On the way up she was explaining to me that her job was similar to Horse's job. She was a tour manager.

And now she was crying, so I held on. Trying to offer some comfort for her grief. I wondered about this man that they all carried so tightly, years after his death. Addiction was a brutal disease. Once that monster got ahold of you, it was as violent and destructive as cancer. And not to diminish the struggles of cancer, but addiction often scarred and tortured the patients and anyone who loved them. All these people loved Horse's brother and from the looks of it, they loved him a lot.

After Sarah's request and Horse's breakdown there was a few minutes of silence. So I just stood like the others,

manning my spot in the circle, holding Kelly's hand and Wyatt's. Others had joined hands, even Kat and Sarah's manager, Marcus, who I'd never seen without his phone in front of him. He was the first one to speak.

"Garrett was a douche," he said.

A blond girl, who I met earlier but didn't know anything about other than her name was Meredith, gasped.

Marcus scoffed at her. "Oh come on, Mer. He tortured you. Always pushing your buttons, questioning your feminism, poking holes in your arguments, and not because he disagreed with you, but because he loved to get a rise out of you."

Meredith nodded, crying and smiling at the same time.

"He was a douche, captain of the douchebags really." He paused, his jaw tightening to keep his tears at bay. "He was also my friend. And he was a good fucking friend. He would drive five hours with you to catch some random band no one else wanted to see. He used to text message me jokes when the rest of you were talking about something he knew I didn't care about, just to make sure I was always engaged. He was the kind of guy that never got a smoothie without remembering to ask if you wanted him to bring you one. Yeah, he was the best douchebag I've ever known."

Horse laughed, and then so did some of the others.

Josh, Kat and Sarah's producer, said, "He had an incredible voice. It was natural talent. He moved from one note to the next with such precision."

“You could hear his soul when he sang,” said the guy I hadn’t met yet. He was the quietest one and maybe the prettiest.

“You could,” Josh said, and then he looked down at his feet, seemingly embarrassed. “I have recorded tracks of him scatting. Lots of them.” He expelled a large breath and then smiling, he said, “Sometimes I put his sounds into the mix on people’s records without telling them.”

The shy pretty guy said, “Me, too. He’s on Kat’s first record.”

Kat laughed. And then looking at Horse, she said, “As it should be.”

Horse nodded.

“He’s on Sarah’s new record, too.” Josh said, confessing as well.

“Really?” Sarah’s voice trembled.

Josh nodded.

“Thank you.” Sarah happily wept. “Just thank you.”

Josh smiled softly at her, and then Bruno spoke. I saw Wyatt chatting with him earlier. Bruno was a big dude. Not tall like Wyatt but broad. He owned LSA records—inherited it from his parents. Last week, busy feeling anxious about looking like an ass in front of all these award-winning creative people, I read about them. And there was a lot to learn about Bruno. Apparently, he was known for being both loyal and vicious. I knew you shouldn’t always believe what you read on the internet, but I could see it on him, the fierceness of all kinds.

“Garrett was my best friend,” he said. “He was loyal as fuck, confused in so many ways, endlessly creative. Genius sometimes. Utterly deficient other times. I miss him. I can’t remember laughing like I laughed with him since he left us.” He used the side of his fist to punch himself in the heart, and then his voice cracked when he said, “He was my brother, too.”

“Yes,” Horse said, crossing the circle and crushing Bruno into a giant man hug. They were all muscle, like two bears holding each other up. We watched them. They weren’t sobbing but the emotion around them was palpable. When they broke apart, Horse looked out at us all. He looked happy, maybe thankful even.

Next to me Kelly said, “I fucked him once.” The clearing got so silent you could hear a pin drop.

“You did?” Meredith said, not exactly sounding shocked.

Kelly nodded.

Meredith started laughing. At first it was a giggle, and then she was hysterical. I looked around the circle, looking to see if there was any clarification in the other’s reactions, but no one seemed to know why Meredith was laughing. She worked hard to get control of her hysteria. It was two steps forward, one step back for a few minutes of cackling before she was finally able to speak.

She said, “I did, too.” And then she was hysterical again.

Next to me Kelly broke into raucous guffaws.

“No way,” Josh said, clearly astounded. “Neither one of you ever slept with me.”

“Or me,” Marcus added.

“I never slept with any of you fools,” Kelly smarted. “But Garrett was sexy.”

“Sensual,” Mer offered. She laughed again. “Something about him was just seductive. On like lots of levels.”

“Agreed.” Bruno concurred. “Honestly, I considered sleeping with him.”

Everyone was laughing again. When it grew still, Horse said, “Garrett got dealt a shit hand.” He pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Fuck, I did too, and my sorrows were nothing compared to his nightmares. His monsters chased him. He had some dark, dark moments. But he was also life incarnate.” I watched as all of Horse’s friends nodded their heads in agreement.

Horse continued. “He was passionate about every moment. When my life was at its darkest the first time, he pulled me back into the light. He reminded me that we need people. That loving someone is what this life is all about.” Horse turned to Sarah. Then he dropped to his knees, wrapped his arms around her waist, pressed his cheek against her belly, and closed his eyes. She reached out and rubbed her fingertips across his scalp before cradling his head for a minute. Then with open eyes, he leaned back, looked up at her, and said, “He would bless our marriage because you did that for me, too. You saved me from the darkness he left behind.”

Now I was crying. I ran the tip of my middle finger under my eye to wipe away the tears.

Sarah dropped to her knees before him. She spoke softly, gently when she said, "I want to marry you now. In this place surrounded by your family and mine."

He laughed. And then he quirked his head at her because she was serious. We could all see it. "What?" Horse said. "What do you mean?"

A nervous energy fluttered in my chest. Sarah was creating magic. I could feel it all around me. She stood and offered Horse her hand, and then she turned to everyone else.

"I am prepared to marry this man, right now. With all of you as our witnesses. We will still have our crazy bridezilla style wedding tomorrow, but this will be the moment when we were really joined. The moment when this idea of Garrett was here with us."

"Holy fuck," Bruno said. "If he won't marry you, I will."

There was a clatter of laughter, and then Duke stepped forward, crossing the circle until he was standing behind Horse and Sarah, taking the position of the wedding officiant.

Horse looked at him and then at Sarah and then at Duke again.

Duke shrugged. "Turns out it's not that hard to get ordained."

Next to me a smiling Wyatt shook his head and muttered under his breath, "Huh, look at Dad, keeping a secret."

Still awaiting confirmation, Sarah said to Horse, "What do you say? You wanna marry me right now?"

Horse didn't hesitate. "Hell, yeah, I do."

Sarah turned, beckoning us closer. We tightened our positions, creating a semicircle around them. When Duke began to speak, his voice was deep and reverent. “I only have one biological daughter,” he said. “And while she was always as strong-willed and bravehearted as all my sons, she still stood out. She was the one who worried the most about who was going to take care of me. Who was going to love me? Who was going to feed me?” He reached out and ran his finger under her chin, smiling sentimentally. “I’m not silly enough to think that her soft heart has anything to do with her gender. Sarah is this way because she loves with every breath. It’s why she painted our front door pink to support breast cancer awareness month when she was a girl. It’s why she comes home once a month no matter what. It’s why she saw the kindness in this man standing here—when he thought he’d hidden that part of himself from the world.”

I listened to Duke’s words and watched as Sarah and Horse stared into each other’s eyes. I pretty much always cry at weddings. They are palpable rituals. They bring me into the space in my heart where I yearn for love and partnership. When I was single, I guess I cried out of desire and need. Now that I had Wyatt’s hand in mine, my tears were different. They were about the boldness of our love, the bravery of it. I had reached the point in my life where a wedding had become a mirror. It reflected my own feelings of love at me. So, I cried sweetly for the power of my connection to my wonderful, silly, smart, emotional man, and I longed desperately to be tied to him for eternity.

Duke continued. “Horse loves my daughter. From what I have seen, he loves her, as she does him, with every breath. That’s important. I want that for her, but that’s not why I agreed to marry them today. Horse inspires my girl like no

other. He supports her drive. And just like she pulled him from the dark and helped him heal, he pushes her to create and grow in a way that no one else ever has. Together they are better, happier, stronger, more supported and successful.”

Duke paused. He looked from Sarah and Horse to all of us and he smirked before he said, “My sons have grown my family and they have brought more daughters into my house, beautiful headstrong women who bring me so much joy.” He made the effort to look at Kat, Jamison, Maddie, and then me. I gasped a little, not expecting his gaze. Wyatt squeezed my hand. I looked up at him. Like me he was emotional. He had glassy eyes and the streaks left behind by a few quiet tears that had run down his cheeks. Gazing at me, he mouthed, *I love you*. I felt a smile spread out across my face like the warmth of the sun on a chilly afternoon. I loved him, too. I loved him the way Sarah loved Horse and the way all his brothers’ wives loved them. Wyatt was it for me, always.

Duke turned back to Horse and said, “Son, you will have the honor of being my only son-in-law. And I am aware that you better my house. I see you moving through my family, supporting all of us and sharing your kindness and insight. You are already fiercely protecting what I think of as mine and as we officially bring you into our fold today, I know you will continue to care for what is yours.”

Duke paused, took a deep breath, and then with a shaking voice said, “I know what it is to love a woman and to be loved by a woman in the way that Sarah and Horse love each other. This kind of love is all encompassing. It is the marrying kind of love not because society tells us marriage

is a box to tick off in the progression of life. This is the marrying kind of love because you are desperate to make the commitment to each other to ensure that your souls are intermingled for a lifetime. So without further ado, let's make that happen."

At Duke's request, Sarah and Horse swore to dedicate their lives to each other, to fill their days with laughter, to celebrate each other's spirits and accomplishments, to inspire each other, to help each other find their strength when they get lost, and of course to love each other for the rest of their days.

When the exchange of vows was complete, Duke smiled and said, "Under the watchful eye of Horse's brother and my wife, and by the power vested in me by a half-hour internet certification..." He paused, allowing for laughter. "I am absolutely delighted to pronounce you married."

At any other wedding this moment was when you would cheer, but it didn't happen. We were all still, peacefully silent, overwhelmed by their love, basking in the cool mountain air of the Montana summer, knowing that we were lucky enough to bear witness to something perfect. After a full beat, Sarah bit her lip, then reached up and cupped Horse's cheek, and he grinned so wide he looked a little crazy. Cody, who I thought of as the least sentimental of the Morgan brothers, called out through the snuffles of his own emotion, "Kiss her, you fool."

There was laughter and some serious kissing and then, finally, a cacophony of cheers.

LATER THAT NIGHT I couldn't sleep. After Sarah and Horse's secret real wedding, we had the rehearsal dinner for what everyone in the know was now calling their pretend wedding. The dinner, like the rest of the day, felt festive and all the Morgan boys had a little too much fun. Suffice it to say that I did the driving on the way home and Wyatt did the singing.

If I haven't mentioned it before, Wyatt is a big dude, so herding him up the steps and into the house was kind of a fiasco. There were sloppy dance numbers, almost falls, proclamations of love, and a whole lot of other adorable behaviors. I made a mental note to make sure to get Wyatt wasted at home one day, just so I could enjoy being silly, happy drunk with him. However, what he needed in this specific moment was a good night's sleep, because even if tomorrow was now all make-believe, it was still Sarah's wedding day. There would be things to take care of and photos—albeit pink-haired ones—and I knew he wouldn't want to feel hungover. So I forged ahead, pushing him toward the bedroom, stopping only to get him a couple of bottles of water and some aspirin.

Once we were in our bedroom, I convinced him to sit on the bed, and then I got to work pulling off his boots and his jeans. He cracked dirty jokes and got a little grabby, but that was okay. I liked him grabby. I liked the feeling of him on my skin. Eventually he was sitting on the side of the bed in his T-shirt and boxer briefs, and I was standing in front of him between his knees. Since we'd come into the bedroom, the wild and rambunctious energy had burned off and his eyes had grown droopy with exhaustion.

I handed him a bottle of water and said, "Drink."

He obliged, making quick work of all seventeen ounces and then, more like a boy than a man, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

“Okay,” I said sweetly, touching his forehead. “Lie down and go to bed.”

“No.” He popped the word like a cute but willful child.

I responded in kind, mommying his defiance. “Yes, it’s time for bed now.”

He lifted his hand to the outside of my thigh, slowly dragging it up till he reached my waist. Then he tilted his head up and with a tone that expressed utter thankfulness, he said, “Not without you.”

He held my face in his gaze. There was no underlying sexiness to his comment; Wyatt Morgan was just loving me, needing me, wanting me in bed with him so he could hear me breathe. I knew because that was how I felt about him. Answering his call for closeness, I pulled off my own clothes and crawled into bed with him.

Once I was there, he pulled me to his chest, his arms falling heavier than usual. Then, he curled his body around mine, making me the little spoon. Right before his breaths grew heavy and even, he said, “I love you like that, Caro, like I need our souls intermingled for a lifetime.”

That was why I couldn’t sleep. Because I’d been thinking that same thing since Duke said the words. I was desperate to commit myself to Wyatt, to intermingle our souls for a lifetime, and I couldn’t wait another day, not anymore. I needed him and he needed me. We were forever. Period.

When the sun finally peeked into our bedroom window, I gently freed myself from Wyatt's grasp and went looking for my purse, more specifically my cell phone. When we came in, I was pretty sure I just threw it down since my efforts were clearly focused elsewhere, but now I had a couple calls to make because today was going to be my day.

“W yatt.”

I didn't want to get up. I had a little bit of a headache and my mouth felt like sandpaper.

“Wyatt, son?”

I shifted my feet and turned over, but I kept my eyes closed.

“Wyatt, it's time to get up, son.”

I reached out my arm to search for the warmth of Caroline. When I didn't find her, it started to register that my father's voice was in our bedroom. And then I was awake, terror running like a current through my whole body.

Bolting upright, I frantically asked, “Where is Caroline?” Tacky and stuck together, the words clamored out of my dry mouth. He put his hand on my shoulder, and I examined his face, looking for any sign that something was awry. He was smiling and his eyes were sparkling with delight or maybe mischief. He didn't seem stressed or nervous so nothing terrible was happening. My heart rate slowed and I crashed

backwards onto my bed, putting the pillow over my face before saying a muffled, "What are you doing here, Dad? I'm fucking exhausted. I need a few more hours of rest before the circus begins."

He laughed. And then he said, "Oh, son, the show has begun. Also, language."

Peeking out from behind my pillow, I glanced at the clock on the night table. It was not even eight a.m. What was he talking about? Better question, why was he in my bedroom and where was Caroline?

I sat up again. I eyed him up for a minute and then said, "What are you doing here?"

"Getting you up." He smiled like a damn fool.

Clearly he knew something I didn't. I considered the possibilities. Was this some kind of a prank? I fully expected retribution for the pink hair fiasco, but I also figured their attempts to get back at me would take place somewhere down the line, when they thought I'd let my guard down. What they didn't know was that the trick to being tricky was to never let your guard down. But still, today? That seemed unlikely.

"Why? Why are you getting me up, Dad? Also, where is Caroline?"

My father, who had been sitting on the end of the bed by my feet, pressed his hands into his thighs and stood. "There's a bottle of water there on the night table. You should drink that. Then I'd say definitely go brush your teeth and wash your face. Just cause you're looking a little rank, kid." He snickered at his own comment. Signaling to the chair in the

corner where my gray sweatpants were splayed out, waiting to be worn, he said, “Caroline suggested you wear those.”

Of course she did. Caroline loved those sweatpants. Pretty much anytime I put them on, she took them off. I felt myself smiling at the thought of her. And then instinctually I asked again, “Where is she?”

My father picked up a coffee mug that was on my dresser, which he must have put down when he was trying to wake me, and he took a small sip before he said, “She’s here. Waiting for you on the back porch. Wash your face, get dressed, and come on out.”

And then with that cryptic statement, he turned, sauntering out of my bedroom like a sassy cat. I had a right mind to follow him, annoyed and in need of more information, but I didn’t have a clue what I’d find out there and I was in my underwear, which in certain company might be majorly inappropriate. So, sort of irritated and sort of amused, I followed his instructions. I went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, and washed my face. I also tried to mess with the pink ends of my hair, do something to make them less prominent, but it was no use. A quick sniff of my T-shirt got it tossed in the hamper with yesterday’s underwear. I considered a full shower but opted instead for a washcloth to my pits and a swipe of deodorant.

Needless to say, when I grabbed fresh underwear and the gray sweats, I was less rank than my father’s original assessment. Caroline liked me in these sweats and not much else, so the fact that she didn’t pick out a shirt got me thinking that maybe she didn’t want me to have one. I chewed my lip over that for a minute. If there was a whole gaggle of people in my house, it would make sense for me to put on a shirt,

but Caroline didn't make mistakes. So, I went with it, donning gray sweats and pecs for the morning sun.

Once I was clothed, I headed out into the hall. At the top of the stairs, I stopped to listen. All was quiet. I could hear some voices but not many and not booming. Whatever was happening, it wasn't an ambush. Putting my cautiousness aside, I padded down the stairs, feeling the wood smoothed by time under my bare feet. I was eager to see Caroline. I'd gotten used to waking up next to her, and I liked my mornings best when I could see her face.

Pushing open the back door, my eyes landed on her. She was standing barefoot in the grass wearing her long sleeveless white nightgown and a crown of flowers, weeds really, yellow dandelions she must have picked from the yard. She was kind of swaying as she assessed a flowerbed we'd dug and planted together a month ago. At the sound of me coming through the door, she turned and grinned. I stopped, just far enough over the threshold to let the door close behind me, and let the joy of just seeing her wash over me.

In a move that felt almost poetic, she curtsied, a funny little buckle of her knees like a Victorian woman would at the start and end of a dance. I smiled and chuckled to myself, and then I echoed her sentiment with an equally Victorian bow. Formalities aside, she started heading in my direction. As she was crossing to me, I first felt the presence of other people off to my left. I glanced that way and watched my father and Hank stand up.

"Morning, Wyatt," Hank said warmly.

Still feeling very much in the dark about what was happening, I knew I sounded a little confused when I responded. “Uh, hi, Hank.”

I turned back and watched Caroline come up the steps. She got close and took my hands in hers before she said, “I can see you trying to parse it all out. Your mind is racing to figure out the answers. Don’t worry, okay?” She looked sweet and soft with her long hair catching in the breeze and her head encircled in the wilting yellow flowers.

“Okay,” I said quietly before asking, “So, you want to tell me what’s going on?”

She looked up at me, focused her big pretty eyes on my face, and said, “Wanna marry me, Wyatt?”

Just instinctually, I nodded yes. And then I realized she meant it, like my girl was proposing to me. My insides started to shake a little. The pieces around me started to fall into place. She wasn’t just proposing; her father and my father were here because she wanted to get married now. She wanted to get married in the morning sun in the backyard, her in her nightgown and a crown of weeds and me bare-chested and barefoot in my sweatpants that she loved. This was Caroline’s pressure-free, love-filled wedding day.

My mind raced with all the things that didn’t make sense about the moment, the social and cultural things. I was supposed to get down on one knee and ask her. I was supposed to give her a ring. We were supposed to be engaged for a time and then stand before all our loved ones and pledge of love for eternity. There was a process to marrying a person and Caroline was throwing out that whole process and writing her own script. It startled me. But

it didn't upset me. Who said you have to follow the script? I was prince enough to know that when you've found your princess, there are no rules.

Her tone nervous, Caroline said, "Was that a yes?"

I nodded a second time, but I also said the word. "Yes."

She giggled with a smile so wide it looked like it hurt. Then it slipped a little. "I mean like now. You know that, right?"

I nodded a third time. Then I pulled her to me, picked her up off the ground, and spun in circles. As she laughed and squealed, I called out, "Caroline Winchester, I'd marry you any day, any time, any place that you would have me. I am yours. Now and forever."

And I did. I married her in the backyard with the grass tickling my toes. Of course, my father cried, and so did hers because it turned out the sheriff was a big ol' softie, too.

I

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“Shotgun,” Garrett hollered. I didn’t know why he bothered to say the words. We all knew that if Bruno was driving, Garrett was sitting shotgun, especially if our entire crew was going out together. The only car all nine of us fit in was Bruno’s Suburban. He got it sophomore year, and I’d bet he chose the car because we liked to travel as a pack, not that he’d admit that. He wasn’t big on speaking his truth, but he loved us.

Ever since we met in the freshman dorm, all of us were inseparable: nine music majors. And honestly, there was no explaining it because we were very clearly unsuited. Music was pretty much the only thing we had in common. But it was a certain kind of love. We were so different and yet, somehow we created a makeshift family.

As we strolled through the parking garage, Kelly came up behind me, put both hands on my shoulders and used me as a vault to jump onto my back. I caught her legs in my palms. They stuck out in front of me so I started to run using her legs as weapons to hit the others.

“Tonights the night, Eeyore.” She taunted. She nicknamed me Eeyore because as she put it, I was a mopey SOB. I was mostly incredibly focused but to a bunch of college-age musicians, mopey and focused are pretty much the same thing. I couldn’t fight that truth. So, half the time everyone called me Eeyore, but I didn’t mind. It was the first nickname I ever had, and I liked that someone paid enough attention to notice my personality. She continued, “I can feel it in me bones.” Kel, came from a huge Irish family and sometimes she talked like she was from a wee village.

“Awww yeah, it is,” Bruno shouted. “We gonna find our little sad faced donkey a score.”

I shook my head and rolled my eyes.

Meredith who was always the first to come to anyone’s defense said, “Stop it you guys. A man’s virginity is a big deal.”

In front of me Horse and Garrett laughed, they were brothers. Not by blood but they grew up in the same foster family. Horse was the calm to Garrett’s storm. Bringing the storm was what Bruno and Garrett had in common. Those two were thick as thieves.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong but is a man’s virginity really all that sacred?” Kelly asked.

James, a killer vocalist and my closest friend, said, “Debatable, are we talking culturally or personally?”

Despite her vagina, Meredith, a consummate overachiever and double major, music (like the rest of us) and also women’s studies, answered him, “Clearly, we culturally render male virginity as a defining right of passage, an

instantaneous pathway from boyhood to manhood and therefore the masculine goal is discarding one's virginity ASAP. So arguably, not sacred."

Bruno, the dude most likely to disregard Meredith's insights, said, "Okay now that Mer has provided today's lesson. Perhaps, I could add my penis's opinion. Sex is natural. Sex is good. Not everybody does it but everybody should." He punctuated this statement with a goofy grin, and then dramatically held up the keys and hit the unlock button so the Suburban beeped at us.

"Dude," Josh said, rolling his eyes as he walked past Bruno. "That's not your penis. It's George Micheal and his penis and your penis are and were interested in different things."

"To date," Bruno smarted.

Josh smirked. "Of course, who knows who future Bruno will come to love."

"I'm guessing future Bruno," Marcus joked, as we all started climbing into the SUV.

"Dude," Bruno retorted, "Takes one to know one."

"Touché, my man touché," Marcus laughed. "I plan on loving future Marcus. It's my number one goal. I might even love present Marcus later today." Once the joke hit, Marcus moved into the back back row and stuck his nose in his phone. That was Marcus, always listening but always distracted.

We filed in taking our seats, hip to hip. The Suburban was huge and cushy, only top of the line for Bruno, but we were still nine so we filled every inch.

Kelly brought the conversation back to me. “But really now, Eeyore’s V-card needs to be spent. Amiright?”

“If he wants to spend it.” Meredith said, giving me a little smile of encouragement.

My virginity wasn’t particularly sacred. It just wasn’t a concern. Sex was a variable I didn’t have the time to contend with. Did I want to have sex? Sure. I was a man. I had a penis. It liked women. But logically, safe sex required spending time getting to know and trust a woman and I didn’t have that time right now. I had goals. I had to be the best recording engineer ever. I wanted a Grammy. And I wanted it soon. Worrying about sex and having sex interfered, and nothing could interfere with my goals. I had to show my science professor parents that success in an artistic field was an acceptable life path. And I was pretty sure that a Grammy before thirty would redeem me from being seen as a failed experiment.

“He wants to spend it.” Garrett said. “That shit burns a hole in everyone’s pocket, male, female or otherwise.”

Horse teased him, “Just because you’re a whore, doesn’t mean Eric needs to be.”

“Wait.” Bruno said, “Isn’t the whole point of going to this thing to get Eeyore laid?”

It was Valentine’s Day and ‘This thing’ they were dragging me to was an event called *Lust and Found: a Valentine’s Day Scavenger Hunt for the Unattached*. Basically, you got hooked up with a stranger and had to spend the evening doing ridiculous tasks in order to win an inconsequential prize. That said, if I was going, the plan was to win.

“It’s not like we had anything else to do,” Josh said. He was sitting next to Marcus, and as usual the lone voice of reason in a sea of chaotic bravado.

“We shouldn’t have to do anything,” Mer argued. “Valentine’s Day is totally a holiday created by corporations.”

“Gee, you’ve so never said that before,” Garrett teased.

“No, but really,” Kelly insisted. “This whole scavenger hunt thing is to help Eric out, right? Because I’m with Bruno. Why else would we do this?”

To the surprise of everyone, Marcus piped up, “It kinda sounds like fun, a playful night of whimsy. I like the idea.”

“Oh shit,” Bruno said, “Did Marcus secretly manipulate us again?”

“Perhaps.” Marcus smirked.

Finally the whole car took a collective breath and I said, “I am not losing my virginity this evening. But thank you for your concern.”

“Damn.” Kelly said. “I was so excited.”

Horse laughed, “Jesus Kel, why are you so invested in where Eric puts his cock.”

She shrugged, “Sucker for a fuck story, I guess.”

THE *LUST and Found* scavenger hunt was sponsored by some college organizations, but it was being held at a club near

Fenway Park. Bruno found a parking space and we walked up together. I liked showing up with my crew. We made an impression. We looked funky. We were musicians, rock n' roll and we looked part. Well, they looked the part. I wore jeans, a black top, and shit-kickers every day. But, standing among them with their tattoos and funky haircuts, I didn't stand out. I looked somber and creative because they were my friends. It was like we were a diversity commercial created by Pepsi or something, like any minute we were gonna break into a flash mob.

So, the people turned when we arrived. They always did. I loved it. When you are not a stand out kind of a man, it was a thrill to be perceived as part of the cool kids, to feel seen. That said, even though we'd been friends for three years, I still felt like one day they would all wake up and realize that I totally didn't belong in their little pack and yet day after day, they stood by me, my found family. That was maybe why I let them waste my time and drag me to events like this scavenger hunt.

A hoard of people were lined up at the door, waiting to sign up and receive the details for the evening. We got in line. It was cold. Winter in Boston is no joke, so I was surprised by the turnout. There were a lot of people, a real crowd. The idea of being paired with a stranger for the evening didn't really appeal to me. The small talk of the average person felt wasteful. My brain would quickly drift off to what I should be doing to accomplish my goals. Sometimes, giving in to the pressure in my mind, I'd become curt and strangers would read that as rude. But apparently, others felt differently or maybe the need to avoid feeling like a Valentine's Day loser drove out the hoard.

After a minute or two of waiting in line, Meredith and James decided to slip into their regular musical schtick. They performed on the commons or in T-stations from time to time. James would put his hat down and they made a pretty penny. Not everyday that a little blond white girl beat-boxes, while a stunning tall dark-skinned god of a man sings. If you asked, they would tell you that they were just practicing, but they surprisingly chose to practice in public more often or not. We'd recorded them in the studio a few times. It wasn't a record or anything but they could certainly have a go at being YouTube phenoms.

Their performance drew the attention of a few more people, including a girl who I couldn't seem to look away from. Her hair was purple. Not like royal purple, pale purple, what we call lavender even though the lavender flower isn't that color at all. She looked like a sprite. Not metaphorically, she actually looked like a sexy sprite, like Tinkerbell. As a teenager, I'd rewatched Peter Pan and realized that Tinkerbell was smokin,' curvy and buxom all at the same time, in that little green tutu flaunting her figure all over Peter. Sadly, she was also kind of a turncoat, but still appearance wise, way more seductive than I'd remembered. The girl with the lavender hair had that, a sexy magic quality. Her hair came a few inches past her chin, still long enough to be flirty, but shorter than most girls. And she had the kind of face that is sweet, like a doll, long eyelashes, big eyes, full lips that she painted lavender to match her hair. She was what happened when you crossed the girl next door with a fairy princess, only in jeans.

Not for me, clearly. A girl like that is a handful, too pretty, too unique, too much work. But man, she was fun to look at. She was bubbling with energy. Actually dancing to James

and Mer's performance, like they were a ten piece band. She was with a friend. The friend looked about as happy to be standing in line as I was, but the girl was unaffected. She was focused on enjoying her time, at least that's what it looked like to me.

The line moved slowly and I kept watching her. I would look away, but then after a minute or two my eyes would find their way back to her bouncing purple locks. For a moment, I let my thoughts wander to where they really wanted to go. I wondered if her hair would feel like silk between my fingers? Were her lips sweet? What would it be like to feel a woman like that? To have her want me, touch me, or, oh God, take me in her mouth? I looked away again. I had goals. I didn't have time for girls with lavender hair and marshmallow lips to match.

As we approached the sign up table, Katie was behind me again, whispering in my ear, "That your type, Eeyore?"

"What? No. Why?" I was not slick. Not even close.

"Just saw ya looking." She teased.

"She's pretty. But no, not my type. I'm just bored enough to look."

"Sure, sure. I'm buying it," Kel said sarcastically.

It was our turn to sign in and the girl manning the table looked at me and Kel and said, "Are you a couple? Because if so you are allowed to play but you can't enter any of the date lotteries. You have to partner with each other."

Bruno, who was just behind us piped up, "They're not a couple. She'd fucking eat him. However ..." He grabbed Garrett by the elbow. "We are."

Garrett laughed, and draping his tall gangly frame around Burno's bulk, he looked right at the girl behind the table and said, "Don't look so jealous, bitch." Then, he licked Burno's face, like a big wet sloppy tonguing from chin to forehead.

Bruno grinned at the girl, and said, "See."

Behind me, I could hear Marcus and Josh laughing.

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